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Post-2020, Sheboygan County businesses strengthen their commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion

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SHEBOYGAN - After former police officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd in 2020, workers and consumers across the country demanded that companies step up to combat systemic racism and inequality.

In Sheboygan, government officials, schools, nonprofits and Black residents either called for or committed to supporting change in Sheboygan.

More than a year-and-a-half later, many Sheboygan County businesses and organizations are working to strengthen their commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion.

Lakeland University recognized it stands on Indigenous land with an official plaque last year; the John Michael Kohler Arts Center transitioned one employee into a full-time diversity position a few months ago. Kohler Company, which — like other companies — says its focus on diversity work began several years ago, told the Sheboygan Press the company has “intensified” its work since 2020.

Here are some ways five Sheboygan County businesses and organizations — Kohler Company, Acuity Insurance, Rockline Industries, Lakeland University and the John Michael Kohler Arts Center — are promoting diversity, equity and inclusion at the start of 2022.

What is diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging?

Diversity, which comes in many different forms, can refer to people's range of different identities and experiences, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, ability and more.

For businesses and other organizations, diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB)

practices try to ensure that people of different identities and backgrounds are treated fairly and feel comfortable, heard and valued.

“DEI comes from a place of listening and learning,” said Jamie Haack, director of DEI at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center. “Listening and understanding where people are at and where they’re coming from, their value system and who they are in other areas of social identity — that’s how we can meet people where they are and provide them experiences that feel inclusive.”

Organizational leadership take on explicit DEI roles

At the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, a nonprofit visual and performing arts complex and community art center, a history of supporting diversity led to the recent creation of a formal diversity position.

“In general, the Art Center has always had a strong position on equity and valuing all aspects of a person’s being and way of thinking, and really offering different perspectives to challenge the social norms we might be used to,” Haack said.

The Art Center’s former executive director, Ruth Kohler, long promoted the tagline, “All the Arts for All the People,” according to Haack. The center creates programs to appeal to people “age zero to 99,” with a lot of free programming to reduce cost barriers, Haack said.

The Arts Center, which engages with artists locally to internationally, also supports up-and-coming and self-taught artists, who are not always traditionally valued in the museum world, Haack said.

Still, after the murder of George Floyd, the Art Center decided to take a stand on values around which it was already grounded.

As a result, Haack — who said that being of mixed background and having a Black son, she was deeply impacted by George Floyd’s murder and found passion for diversity work — transitioned from marketing director to director of DEI last fall.

In her new position, Haack has been able to partner with a consulting firm to audit Art Center policies such as hiring practices and internal communication methods, which led to recommended changes.

Next, the center can rethink how to promote equitable relationships with community partners, Haack said.

A similar transition occurred recently for Le’Shay Guy, who started at Lakeland University a few years ago as director of multicultural affairs and became director of student DEIB initiatives last

year.

With her new title, Guy does much of the same work, but with more support, she said.

"We realized that diversity, equity and inclusion work is way more broad than one department," she said.

Before the transition, she was doing a lot of work on her own. Now housed in the campus's Ulrich Center for Faith, Ethics and Justice, she "turned from a department of one to a department of four or five," she said.

"Since I have been here, Lakeland has done a great job responding to issues so that our students know that we support them, we're here for them, we hear them," Guy said.

While the university started diversity work well before she was hired as a member of staff, she says the environment today is a "huge cultural shift" from when she was a student.

"Back then, Lakeland wouldn't speak on those issues, they would kind of bury the hatchet," she said. "Now, they're more vocal about taking these issues seriously."

Away from the nonprofit and educational world, Kohler Company is one example of a company that has "taken ownership of DE&I at the highest levels" with the establishment of an Executive Leadership Diversity Board in 2020, said Bridget Penney, vice president of talent and diversity.

The board has developed a strategic foundation for the company centered on four pillars: building diversity teams that reflect Kohler's communities and customers, fostering an inclusive culture that welcomes difference, working with suppliers that uplift women and minority-owned businesses, and exploring new markets through diverse lenses.

DEI trainings build understanding among staff

Another common thread among businesses and organizations ramping up DEI work is more diversity trainings.

"Although DEI concepts and topics sometimes feel basic, sometimes they're really foreign to people depending on where you come from and your background," Haack said. "So we thought it important to have some baseline training for all staff — that was mandatory — to get an understanding of: What is a social identity? What is a microaggression? What does DE and I mean?"

Rockline Industries, Inc., an international company with headquarters in Sheboygan that primarily makes wet wipes and coffee filters, has similarly started a "Connection Series" of

optional monthly live webinars that address social topics like mental health awareness, community volunteerism, and DEI, said Kris DeLano, VP of human resources at the company.

At Lakeland University, Guy has already received a lot of positive feedback about DEI trainings, she said. The administrative leadership of the university first did the trainings, which were then opened up to anyone in the campus this school year.

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Companies invest in employees and the broader community

As representatives from Acuity, Rockline and Kohler all highlighted, the companies support the community through charitable giving to nonprofits locally to globally.

But some of the most important diversity work begins internally, Sheboygan companies and organizations told the Sheboygan Press.

As Haack put it, "Our staff are also our community that we're serving."

Rockline Industries, which takes pride in its "people-centered" company values, added a people-focused aspiration to its sustainability commitment two years ago.

To fulfill this aspiration, the company offers things like leadership development and education reimbursement benefits and scholarship opportunities to employees and their family members, DeLano said.

In 2022, Rockline also changed its holiday schedule to replace some company holidays with floating holidays to give employees more flexibility in choosing days off to include holidays that are meaningful to them, DeLano added.

Some larger companies, including Acuity and Kohler, have employee-led resource groups centered on common interests or identities to support staff, too.

Kohler's resource groups, launched in 2018, have partnered on marketing campaigns, supported recruitment efforts and led conversations focused on navigating remote work and product innovation at the company.

"We are early in our journey, and understand that to be impactful, it's actions we take to make real progress," Penney said.

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